Alexis de Tocqueville's Challenging Social Science Methodology

For panel: "Tocqueville's Enduring Lessons of Liberty"

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In *The Idea of Justice*, Amartya Sen divides social theorists into two types.[1] The first, those who engage in 'transcendental institutionalism', concentrate on 'identifying just institutional arrangements for a society.'[2] Sen attributes this mode of thinking to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and John Rawls, though the list does not seek to be exhaustive. Transcendental institutionalism 'concentrates its attention on what it identifies as perfect justice' and then 'on getting the institutions right'.[3] It is not interested in rectifying injustices within actual societies and does not purport to offer a plan on how a particular society might make practical steps from a slightly less just order to a slightly more just order.

In contrast, Sen suggests there to be another set of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers who engage in 'realization-focused comparison'. Such authors—listed as Adam Smith, the Marquis de Condorcet, Jeremy Bentham, Mary Wollstonecraft, Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill—were 'involved in comparisons of societies that already existed or could feasibly emerge, rather than confining their analyses to transcendental searches for a perfectly just society.'[4] As Sen explains further, '[t]hose focusing on realization-focused comparisons were often interested primarily in the removal of manifest injustice from the world that they saw.'[5]

This dichotomy is not always easy to track, and of course questions can be raised about who fits where. Rather than strictly theoretical, some people imagine Rawls, for example, as eminently concerned

[1] Sen, A., *The Idea of Justice* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).
[2] Ibid, p. 5.
[3] Ibid, pp. 5-6.
[4] Ibid, p. 7.
[5] Ibid.

with the dilemma of moral pluralism in our *actually* and *practically* multicultural world. Hobbes, for his own part, was of course directly engaged with the question of the king's legitimacy in the context of the civil war, and everyone knows Rousseau did demand practical reaction to the slave-like subjugation of the French people. On the supposedly realist side, some would counter that Marx's notion of the stages of history are about as theoretically invented as the notions of state of nature in Hobbes and Locke. And Mill may have had practical concerns with free speech and the status of women, but these were handled in such a theoretical way that his writings were expansive enough to be used by conservatives and liberals alike, and have been attacked by third wave feminists as too theoretical. Nevertheless I think Sen's distinction is extremely useful. You see, some people specialise on how things might be, while others specialise on how things are, and conversation between the two is often tough.

Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice* is a book-length critique of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*.[6] As is well known, Rawls says that a just order arises if citizens are covered with a 'veil of ignorance' that means they do not know who in society they will turn out to be. Unable to know the type of person they will become, they then choose policies and institutions that will be fair to all, as it may turn out that they will be a person at the periphery of society, such as someone suffering from disabilities, or someone economically disadvantaged, in which case from the perspective of an original position they will want to be sure that the basic needs of everyone will be met. Sen's concern is that Rawls' ideal theory gives no ammunition about what should be done now in the global order, for such a veil of ignorance will never be placed over the eyes of citizens. Furthermore, the theory fails to see that the question is not just "who receives what from the state" but "how material goods are put to use". Goods and services are provided in heavy interaction with the recipient, such that it is actually impossible to talk about a certain level of state assistance in abstract. Rawls' argument fails because it is perfectionist. There is no-one who can implement it, and no one in society who it can be implemented on.

[6] Rawls, J., *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

I argue here that Sen's antidote, someone able to engage in 'realization-focused comparison' is found almost perfectly in Alexis de Tocqueville. In spite of an aristocratic upbringing, Tocqueville actively sought engagement—oftentimes thoroughly intellectual—with others radically outside his social circle. In *Democracy in America*, he writes at length about his interactions with Native Americans and African-Americans, expounding the various dilemmas in their day-to-day lives, their historical backgrounds, and their moral commitments. He evaluates missionary interactions with indigenous peoples[7] and compares the latest religious trends between continents. He traces the European roots of migrants to America and how their trajectories have been affected by the new circumstances in which they find themselves, and he analyses at length the differences between those new to America and those more than one generation old. Ever attentive to geographical and demographic diversities, he relentlessly points out the diversities within America, resisting a caricature of American attitudes as uncomplicated.

And he points out what is evil. When he does so, he accepts that the problems are hard-wired and tough; that they might be with us for a long time. Writing before the American Civil War, he denounces the injustice of slavery in no uncertain terms:

> In general, men need to make great and consistent efforts to create lasting evils but there is one evil which has crept secretly into the world: at first its presence scarcely makes itself felt amid the usual abuses of power; it begins with one individual whose name history does not record; it is cast like an accursed seed somewhere in the soil; it then feeds itself, grows without effort, and spreads naturally inside the society which has accepted it: that evil is slavery.[8]

At the same time, he assesses that a simple removal of slavery laws will not suffice in combatting the evil, and in fact may make things more confrontational in the short term:

> I must confess that I do not consider the abolition of slavery as a way to delay the conflict of the two races in the southern states.

[7] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1835]), p. 383.
[8] Ibid, p. 399.

> The Negroes may remain slaves without complaining but once they join the ranks of free men they will soon be indignant at being deprived of almost all the rights of citizens and, not being able to become the equals of the whites, they will soon declare themselves their enemies.[9]

The tone is realist, even though it comes part and parcel with a slamming of slavery as economically unsustainable.[10]

To have someone who moves quickly through the dialogues and impressions of widely varying counterparts to give a diverse and complete picture now dazzles our eyes because it has become so rare. Today, those wealthy enough to spend time moving between parts of society are too much on the defensive and apologetic about their wealth to engage with others openly or as moral equals. Indeed, whenever you hear an elite say that populism is being caused by inequality, realise that they are in the same breath excusing themselves from being the one to talk to the populist poor. Journalism, for its part, has been in meltdown for over a decade now, with foreign desks closing around the world and the journalist's main skill changing to that of re-writing existing online information. At the neighbourhood level, Robert Putnam has demonstrated we are increasingly suffering from a 'hunkering down' in the face of greater ethnic diversity, whereby human networks of support are on the decline for both within-group and outside-group connections.[11]

But these challenges to us perceiving the complete picture of a society are not simply sociological, they are written into the way we are trying to do what Tocqueville was doing: political science research. We stand in the midst of a siege against qualitative methods—methods such as extended interviews, focus groups or ethnographic participant observation—in favour of quantitative methods of statistics or randomised control trials. Even methods previously understood as engaged in an appreciation of context and meaning are being re-invented as valuable because quantifiable. We now regularly read analyses of politicians' speeches that focus on the number of times they use a certain word, even though we know deep

[9] Ibid, pp. 422-3.
[10] '[I]n general, the colony without slaves became more populous and prosperous than the one in which slavery flourished.' Ibid, p. 404.
[11] Putnam, R. D., '*E Pluribus Unum*: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century. The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture'. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2007), pp. 137-174.

down that a word only takes meaning through its sentence. Comparative political science increasingly defends its purpose on strictly quantitative grounds, arguing that it is worth funding because it can do small-N hypothesis testing, applying John Stuart Mill's method of agreement and method of difference, or because it can refine our understandings of particular variables in advance of a multiple regression, helping code hard-to-place data points, or because it identifies where there may be endogeneity between variables. For those who pursue a quantitative method, there is often little awareness of the historical context to the causal relation being established, and such students only rarely enjoy meaningful human encounters with their topic. All this stems from the great influence on the social sciences by Max Weber, whose epistemological grounding lies in strict separation of facts from values. The 'model', the 'research design' or the list of independent and dependent variables should be formulated distinctly from one's view of the good life, or the common good of society. Pushed to an extreme, the less human interaction with the subject under study the better, for it would lead to a danger of bias when drafting one's research design or interpreting results. Quantitative methods that grow from the same assumptions are inherently individualistic, in that they take the unit of analysis as a collection of discrete individual items, and are then surprised at interaction and dependence; when in fact we should assume interdependent items and then be surprised at independence. When Weber's principles are applied to the study of human societies, notions of the family or—of particular importance for Tocqueville—notions of the people as a whole, associational groups, or the common good, automatically become the exception, rather than the rule. But if someone could give me 10 men with the same hunger as Tocqueville to listen to every strand of society, and to listen at length, we would end the democratic deficit; because it is the social interrelationship that is the primary material of democracy, and if we continue to insist on an individualisation of what it means to know, we will fail evermore starkly to capture the democratic spirit in our writings.

'Realization-focused comparison' explores the character of society, as if writing a biography. A good example is Tocqueville's insistence on the relevance of *mores*, 'customs and conventions embodying the fundamental values of a group or society.'[12] Tocqueville writes:

> I [consider] mores to be one of the great general causes responsible for the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States.
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> I here mean the term "mores" (*moeurs*) to have its original Latin meaning; I mean it to apply not only to "*moeurs*" in the strict sense, which might be called the habits of the heart, but also to the different notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits.
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> So I use the word to cover the whole moral and intellectual state of a people.[13]

It is not that contemporary social science disavows any reflection on the social whole, it is just that this is done minus a notion of the collective's practical reasoning. For a democracy to have some form of collective reason does not require everyone in society to be intelligent. Tocqueville is far from thinking Americans are all smart—indeed, he devotes an entire chapter to explaining 'Why the Americans Have Never Been as Enthusiastic as the French for General Ideas in Political Matters',[14] and then has another chapter entitled 'Why American Writers and Speakers are Often Bombastic'.[15] Yet a notion of collective sense, collective practical reasoning, pervades his descriptions. That is: how things are seen from the point of view of a common purpose. A common purpose sometimes inspiring, sometimes flawed; always historically grounded, always purposeful. In contrast, when we contemporary social scientists study the collective we talk of 'nationalisms', 'political ideologies', 'identity politics', 'populism' or 'constructed collective imaginations'. This is a process of *othering* the ontology of society, so that we can place scientific distance between ourselves and the subject matter. Tocqueville, however, stands as the counter-argument to David

[12] *Collins English Dictionary* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 4th Ed., p. 1011. From the Latin *mōs*, meaning custom.
[13] Tocqueville, A., *Democracy in America* (London: Fontana Press, 1969 [1835]), p. 287. For others' adoption of Tocqueville's phrase "habits of the heart", see Putnam, R. D., *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), with Robert Leonardi & Raffaella Nanetti, p. 11; and Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A. & Tipton, S. M., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (London: University of California Press, 1996), p. xlii.
[14] Tocqueville, 1969, Vol. 2, Ch 4.
[15] Ibid, Vol. 2, Ch 18.

Hume's, Immanuel Kant's and Max Weber's insistence on knowledge gain through fact-value distinction, for while there are many who have grown wise through refusing the false dichotomy, in Tocqueville we find someone who is also able to engage in comparative and unbiased reflection as well. That is achieving the hidden intention behind Weber's distinction, without having to destroy-through-assuming-away the notion of a purposeful social whole.

Instead, we are afraid of discussion of morality and moral character. We fear that talking explicitly about what is moral could lead to an absolutist idealism on the part of political leaders, and return us to an age of ideology. With this post-traumatic social structure, we seek protection against any form of extremism, intolerance or incorrectness. The surest refuge is human rights law and bureaucratic regulation, and so we place power and trust in independent institutions and the judiciary, and emphasise that the judiciary protects the constitutional order, rather than saying the constitutional order is protected by each of the three branches of government together.

For working out the common good, it means we have lost Tocqueville's sense of meso-level community and instead seek juridical solutions for all vulnerabilities. We ground the management of social relations in the standardisation and expansion of citizen legal entitlements. The more universal, the fairer. We don't so much want equality like the socialists used to, but more a society where everyone is locked into an equivalence of legal personhood, which we hope will make dialogue and encounter with unequal peoples no longer needed, because there will no longer be unequal peoples.

But the fear of morality and of Tocqueville's method of listening to social mores is misplaced. Democracy relies on connection between the moral dilemmas of us citizens as we go about our day-to-day lives with the moral dilemmas of the nation as a whole. Whether our laws are hospitable to migrants is a question *irreducibly interactive* with whether we as a people can and will be hospitable in our individual dealings with migrants. Whether our central banks should lower or raise interest rates is *irreducibly interactive* with whether we as a people aspire to save or spend. Whether the judiciary should be active in striking down government legislation is *irreducibly interactive* with whether we as a people believe fairness is successfully obtained in our courts.

These are questions of ‘realization-focused comparison’, not ‘transcendental institutionalism’, requiring that we adopt Tocqueville’s method of exploring the meso-level of associational behaviour, the moral synergies between people and leader, and the details that make a society a purposeful whole.